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ABSTRACT

A naturalistic study of 112 families in two parks examined proximity and touching between family members as a function of age and sex of child, sex of parent, and family composition variables. Mothers and fathers were strikingly similar in their behavior. Distance from parent increased and touching decreased as age of child increased from the infant years to older age ranges. This age trend was clearer among girls, who were closer to parents as infants but farther away as school-age children than were boys. In addition, second-order effects were found, such that both the presence of the other parent and the presence of other siblings increased distance and decreased touching between a given parent and child, subject to certain interaction effects. Finally, analysis of correlations within families revealed that some families stayed closer together as a unit than did others and that mothers and fathers tended to divide the labor of child supervision. (Author/RH)

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Proximity in Parks: Naturalistic Observation of Family Interactions

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ABSTRACT

This naturalistic study of 112 families in two parks examined proximity and touching between family members as a function of age and sex of child, sex of parent, and family composition variables. Mothers and fathers were strikingly similar in their behavior. Distance from parent increased and touching decreased as age of child increased from the infant years to older age ranges. This age trend was clearer among girls, who were closer to parents as infants but farther away as school-aged children than were boys. In addition, second-order effects were found, such that both the presence of the other parent and the presence of other siblings increased distance and decreased touching between a given parent and child, subject to certain interaction effects. Finally, analysis of correlations within the families revealed that some families stay closer together as a unit than others do and that mothers and fathers tend to divide the labor of child supervision.

This naturalistic study examines interaction patterns of families in parks. Previous studies, both naturalistic and more obtrusive in methodology, have produced conflicting pictures of the relationship between age and sex of child and proximity to parent. Previous studies of proximity between mothers and their infants and toddlers in parks, for example, have yielded conflicting outcomes (Anderson, 1972; Ley & Koepke, 1982; Martinsen, 1982). While building on these naturalistic studies, the present study broadens the scope of inquiry. It includes both mothers and fathers and both infants and older children up to age 12 as subjects, and examines interaction between all pairs of family members. Proximity and touching are analyzed as a function of age and sex of child and sex of parent. Special attention is given to "second-order effects" in which the presence of a second parent or of siblings is expected to alter parent-child interaction.

METHOD

Sample

Four trained observers gathered data in two parks in Lexington, Kentucky, during afternoon and evening hours and weekends in October and November. In an attempt to restrict the focus to families, groups were excluded if they contained more than one adult of the same gender, an adult less than 18 or more than 40 years older than the oldest child in the group, more than three children, or a child over 12 years of age. Observers were trained in age estimation until they achieved correlations between estimated and actual ages of at least .95 and mean discrepancies between the two of less than one year.

The usable sample of 112 families reveals something about who visits parks. Of the 178 children in these families, 58.8% were boys; of the 141 parents, 46.1% were fathers. In 42.0% of the families, the mother was alone with a child or children; in 32.1%, the father was alone; and in 25.9% both parents were present. Of the children, 32.6% were singletons; 47.2% were in two-child families; and 20.2% were in three-child families.

Procedures and Measures

Observers recorded basic descriptive data as a family entered the park. Then, using scaled maps of each park and observing from a standard location, the observer plotted the location of each family member at automatically signalled 20-second intervals for a total of 15 observations, also noting whether family members were touching each other. The distance in yards between each pair of family members at each observation point was later calculated.

The primary measure used in analyses was mean distance in yards between a given pair; however, a square root transformation of the data was performed to normalize what proved to be skewed distributions. The second measure used was a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not a pair of family members touched at any time during the 15 observations. Inter-observer correlations of mean pair distances were established to be .98 or greater between various pairs of observers.

RESULTS

Distances between Parent-Child Pairs

Major findings based on 224 parent-child pairs, were as follows:
1. Mothers and fathers were equally close to their children (mean square root of distance for mothers = 2.61 and for fathers = 2.63).
2. Distance from parent increased with age of child, but did so differently depending on sex of child (SEE FIGURE 1). Among boys, those in the 0-2 range were significantly closer to parents than were those in the 3-5 age range, but the oldest boys (6 and older) were only somewhat farther from parents than the infants were. Among girls, the age effect was stronger, with those age 0-2 staying significantly closer to parents than both older age groups.
3. Although boys and girls were equally close to parents overall, the interaction between age and sex of child meant that in the infant (0-2) years, girls were significantly closer to parents than boys were, while in the school-aged group (6 and over) girls were significantly farther from parents than boys were.
4. Distance between a given parent and child increased when the other parent was present, and also increased as the number of children in the family increased from one to two and from two to three (SEE FIGURE 2). The second-order effect of having other siblings present was robust, generalizing across mothers and fathers and girls and boys. However, the weaker second-order effect of the other parent's presence proved to be apparent among boys but not among girls.

Parent-Child Touching

Although correlations between the distance measure and the dichotomous touching variable for various pairs were moderate, analysis of touching patterns generally confirmed the analysis of proximity (SEE TABLE 1).
1. Fathers and mothers were equally likely to touch their children.
2. Boys and girls were equally likely to touch their parents. Indeed, the only sign that gender mattered was that mothers were more likely to touch later-born girls than later-born boys, whereas they tended to touch first-born boys slightly more than first-born girls.
3. Touching decreased as age of child increased from the infant years to higher age ranges, this time with age trends being almost identical for boys and girls.

4. Again, second-order effects of family composition were apparent. Parent-child pairs were less likely to touch during the observation period as the number of parents present increased and as the number of children in the family increased. Here, however, the two context variables interacted. The presence of the other parent significantly decreased touching only in one-child families, while the presence of other siblings significantly reduced touching between a given parent-child pair primarily in one-parent families, the trend in two-parent families only approaching significance. Thus, the second-order effect of the other parent's presence was most clear when only one child was present, while the effect of competing with other siblings was clearest when only one parent was present.

Dynamics within Families

To determine how closeness between one pair in a family affects closeness between other pairs in the family, correlations between distance scores for pairs were calculated (SEE TABLE 2). Analysis was restricted to first-born and second-born children, and Ns were low.

The fact that most correlations were positive indicates that some families maintain closer proximity as a group than others do. Especially interesting are signs that mothers and fathers divide the labor of child supervision. When mother and first-born child were close, father and second-born child were highly likely to be close; likewise, when father and first-born were close, mother and second-born were close. In addition, mother and father themselves tended to be close when either father and first-born were close or mother and second-born were close. However, their proximity to each other tended to decrease slightly as mother and first-born became closer or as father and second-born became closer.

DISCUSSION

Certainly one of the most striking findings of this examination of naturally-occurring family interaction was the virtual absence of differences between mothers and fathers. Fathers not only were as likely as mothers to be in parks with their children in the first place (c.f. Adams & Lockard, 1982), but also were as likely to be close to them and touch them. This contributes to a wealth of data suggesting that differences between mothers and fathers in parenting behavior are the exception rather than the rule. Similarly, there were few differences between girls and boys, except where sex of child entered into interactions with other variables. It is of special interest to note that while distance from parents increased with age in both sexes, girls were closer to parents in infancy but farther away from parents in the school years. If proximity to parents can be interpreted as an indicator of dependence, girls appear to be involved in more dependent relationships with parents than boys are only in infancy.

In addition, the present study provides strong evidence that the interaction between any given parent-child pair is affected by the composition of the entire family. For boys but not for girls, being accompanied by two parents rather than one increased the distance between that boy and his parents. Moreover, a singleton child, boy or girl, was less likely to be touched if both parents were present than if one parent was present. The presence of siblings substantially increased parent-child distances and, especially in one-parent families, also decreased the likelihood of touching. Such second-order effects on parent-child interaction raise serious questions about the generalizability of findings based on studies of particular parent-child dyads in isolation from their broader family context.

Finally, while the sample of families studied was too small to permit detailed analysis of interaction dynamics within families, our data point to the fruitfulness of examining more closely how the behavior of one dyad in a family affects the behavior of other dyads in a family. More specifically, it would be of interest to explore further the apparent division of labor between mother and father when both are interacting with their children and the bases for it. Naturalistic studies focusing on whole families and diverse age groups have much to offer to a field dominated by relatively controlled studies of parent-child, and most often mother-infant, interaction.

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Table 1

Percentage of Children Touching Parents as a Function of Family Variables

Age		Sex of Parent		Sex of Child	
0-2	68.6%	Mother	53.3%	Girl	52.7%
3-5	43.9%	Father	46.1%	Boy	48.5%
6+	36.2%				
χ^2	14.83				
p	< .001				

No. of Children		No. of Parents	
One	69.6%	One	57.8%
Two	46.4%	Both	39.6%
Three	28.9%	χ^2	7.29
χ^2	19.17	p	< .01
p	< .0001		

Table 2

Correlations between Average Distance Scores for Dyads within Families

	Dyad					
	M & 1st	F & 1st	M & 2nd	F & 2nd	M & F	1st & 2nd
M & 1st		.34*	.35*	.88*	-.13	.32*
F & 1st			.87*	.52*	.59*	.68*
M & 2nd				.48*	.55*	.31*
F & 2nd					-.24	-.02
M & F						.45*

Note: M stands for mother, F for father; 1st for the oldest child or first-born, 2nd for the second-born. Ns range from 16 to 39, depending on the dyad.

* Significant at the .05 level or beyond.